

The harper at Rochester

The wooden bridge at Rochester was so long, and so exposed, that it gained a reputation for being highly dangerous. For somebody halfway across, terra firma would have seemed very distant, especially in bad weather. On one occasion, so the story goes, a man crossing the bridge was blown into the river by a gust of wind. By a miracle he did not drown. He was a minstrel by trade. He had always been devoted to the Virgin Mary -- his pet name for her was "housewife" -- and she heard his cry for help. Finding himself floating on the surface of the water, he unpacked his harp, tuned the strings, and started singing his songs. He was carried downstream for a distance of three miles, singing all the while, till at last he came safely ashore (at Chatham, I suppose).

Somebody writing a vulgar kind of French turned that story into a doggerel kind of verse, and a copy of his poem survives in one of the Cottonian manuscripts. It was put into print by the researcher Francisque Michel (1809-1887) -- who had presumably transcribed this piece during the visit that he made to London in 1833 -- among the notes to his edition of the *Roman d'Eustache le Moine*. I reproduce it as it was published by him (Michel 1834:108-11), inserting just a few queries where the printed text seems to invite them. As far as I know, this is still the only edition. I append some comments by Rye (1866) and Brooks (1994). (They both got the idea that the person who wrote the poem was the same person who had fallen off the bridge. There is nothing to justify that.)

Michel 1834 Francisque Michel (ed.), *Roman d'Eustache le Moine ... publié pour la première fois d'après un manuscrit de la Bibliothèque royale* (Paris: chez Silvestre / London: Pickering, 1834).

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... un fabliau inédit qui se trouve dans le Musée Britannique, Ms. Cottonien, Cleopatra, A. XII, fol. 64, r^o.

DEL HARPUR A ROUCESTRE.

Seignurs, si vus plest escuster,
Un ver mirakel vus volye cunter,
De la mère Deu Marie,
Nostre confort, nostre aye,
Après Deu nostre confort,

Nostre solaz, nostre desport,
 Le voyle auques dyre.
 Entre Lundres e Caunterbyre,
 A Roucestre, ce oy cunter, <? line missing - see Rye>
 Avait un punt mu périlié <? r perilus>
 Dunt maint home fu déchus.
 En cele pase out un harpur
 Qui ne fesait autre labur
 For sulement de harper,
 Car ile ne sout autre mister;
 Cil Nostre Dame must ama,
 Sovent en harpaunt la loa;
 Checun jor sun lay fesait,
 En harpaunt la saluait;
 Sa uswyf l'apella

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La dame que tut le monde sauva,
 Que jà ne ubli celi qui ele ayme,
 Ne qui ad amie la reclayme.
 Un jur cum devayt passer le punt,
 Al retraunt del flote parfunt,
 Si ventayt si durement
 A payne n'i osa passer la gent.
 Le harpur quida ben passer
 E surment saunz desturber;
 Jà en my lu de le punt fu,
 Taunt ly traversout le vent de su,
 Ki en mi lu li ad jeté,
 Que Meduay est apellé;
 Cil, qui mut se deconforta,
 A haut voiz cria:
 « Help wsvyf, help uswyf,
 Oiyer nu I forga mi lyf. »
 En sun englais issi cria,
 Ke il nule ure fyna.
 Plusures genz que ce virent,
 Escutèrent e entendirent,
 A haute voiz unt crié:
 Sainte Marie, la mère Dé!
 Nostre Dame ad ben oy
 De le harpur la pitus cry,
 Mu curtaisment le salva;
 Car cile sure undes flota,
 Qe mut estayent parfundes.
 Cum il flota sur les undes,
 Tut en apert se apersçut
 Que nostre Sire li sucurut.

E là fut-ele Sainte Marie,
Que nul tens le soues ublye.
La mer en haut le caria,
E le harpur se sura;
De le forel ad sa harpe saké
E son plectrun ad enpoyné,
Se cordes a ben atemprez,

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Si ke ben se sunt acordez.
A cient pas wus muntre ray;
Le harpur ad comencé la lay
De icele sainte pucele
Que Deu aleta de sa mamele.
Issi flota tut en harpaunt,
E sa harpe en son dewaunt,
Si tost cum cil est à secce tere,
Gens hi vindrent mirakes vere;
Sur le waches issi flota
Gekes ataunt ke il ariwa
A poy une lue de la cité
Que avaunt vus ai nomé;
Si ariwa desuth une eglise
Ke sure memle lu est asise,
A nostre Seignor en dous lu,
Par sa mère fest grant vertu.
Là est le harpur arrivé
Qui Deu e sa mère unt sauvé,
Sur chalege surment.
« Benet, fait, Deus omnipotent
E sa mère saint Marie,
Ke tut tens nus sait en aye. »
Quant le harpur arivé fu,
A Nostre Dame se est rendu,
En même le lu ù il ariva,
Par qui cel lu mue amenda;
Issi vost Nostre Dame server,
A tuz iceus ke li volunt prier
Cele dame ke Deu porta
E en sone ventre herbeja,
E le nuri de sa mamele,
E l'enfaunta mère e pucele,
Nus doyne sa grace issi server,
Ke ele no prières voyle oyer;
Vers son fyth tust puissaunz
Sainte Marie nus seez aydaunt.
Tres tria donaverunt <? not connected>

*Natum de Virgine querunt,
Melchior et Jaspas, Baptizar fata tulerunt.*

Rye 1866 W. B. Rye, 'Visits to Rochester and Chatham made by royal, noble, and distinguished personages, English and foreign, from the year 1300 to 1783', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 6 (1866), 43--82, esp. 45--6.

... In further illustration of the dangerous state of the ancient wooden Bridge at Rochester, I would call attention to a curious French poem, narrating a catastrophe not unlike the foregoing, but attended with a more pleasant result, which happened about this time to a poor Minstrel or Harper, who was crossing the Bridge, -- described as "very dangerous, and over which many a one had fallen." He had reached the "mid-way," when a violent gust of wind blew him into the Medway. In his distress he calls to the Virgin for help, *in English*: --

"Help wsvyf, help wswyf,
Oiyer nu -- I forga mi lyf."

And "our Lady" graciously deigns to save him, he all the while harping her praises as he floated down the stream. At length he lands about a league from the city, and followed by a crowd who had witnessed the Minstrel's mishap, makes his way to a church "situated in the said place," to offer up his thanks to the Virgin for this miraculous act of preservation: --

"De voyle aukes dyre,
Entre Lundres e Caunterbyre,
A Roucestre, ce oy cunter,
U checun jur a munte la meer,
Avait un punt mu periluz,
Dunt maint home fu dechus.
. . . .
Ja en milu de le punt fu,
Taunt ly traversout le vent de su,
Ki en milu li ad gete,
Que Meduay est apelle," etc./1

/1 This story (*fabliau*) of the "Harpur a Roucestre" is contained in a Cottonian manuscript in the British Museum (Cleop. A. xii. fo. 64 formerly belonging to Dover Priory) and consists of ninety-nine lines of Norman-French verse. It was

probably composed in England by the minstrel himself, who, from the concluding lines, would seem to have made the pilgrimage to Cologne. The piece has been printed, not very correctly, by M. Francisque Michel in his 'Roman d'Eustache le Moine.'

Brooks 1994 N. P. Brooks, 'Rochester Bridge, AD 43--1381', in N. Yates and J. M. Gibson (eds.), *Traffic and politics: the construction and management of Rochester Bridge, AD 43--1993* (Woodbridge, 1994), 1--40, esp. 36.

... A story with a happier ending is that of 'The harper at Rochester', in which a minstrel recounts in ninety-nine lines of French (or rather Anglo-Norman) verse how a gust of wind blew him off the bridge as he was crossing at Rochester. As he was borne down the Medway, he played lustily on his harp, appealing all the while to the Virgin Mary. In consequence he was not drowned, but gained the bank a league downstream and to the applause of a gathering crowd gave thanks to 'Our Lady' in a church there. His song is written in a hand of c. 1300 in a loose quire now bound up with a late thirteenth-century manuscript from St Mary's, Dover./88 ... Whether this *fabliau* is history or simply fiction ... does not matter. The story depended upon the notorious dangers of crossing Rochester bridge (... *un punt mu perilye, dunt maint home fu deschus*) and could not have seemed too far-fetched to contemporaries. None of these episodes refers to any balustrade or handrail on the bridge, not even to its inadequacy or poor repair. ... Apparently the carriageway was a wooden platform without fences or guiderails on either side. ...

/88 London, British Library, Cotton Cleopatra A xii, ff. 68r-69v (old foliation 64r-65v). The song 'Del harpur a Roucestre' ... was printed by F. Michel, *Roman d'Eustache le moine*, Paris 1834, 108-111.